

## THE HAITIAN PEOPLE

133 rains become torrents, washing away crops and soil. Brooks which run most of the year the Haitians dignify by the name of "rivière"; not even the largest, however—the Artibonite, which drains over a fifth of the country—is navigable for anything above a rowboat. The second largest "river," Les Trois Rivières, is only 96 kilometres long. Many of the smaller streams disappear into sinkholes or caves in limestone, veritable lost rivers. Even some of the lakes are ephemeral.

133 Most of the best land of the country lies in its few plains flanking  
3// the mountains near the coasts, or extending like wedges into the mountainous regions. In the northeast in the country back of Cap-Haïtien is the Plaine du Nord; here in colonial times were the most  
175 flourishing of the French plantations, the palatial residences, and the  
[134] slaves who in 1791 began the insurrection which ultimately led to Haiti's independence. In the middle region are the Artibonite Plain near the coast, and the Central Plain back of the Black Mountains. Eastward from Port-au-Prince, the capital, is the Cul-de-Sac; and in the southwestern peninsula is the small plain of Les Cayes. All over the country in French days sugar cane grew in abundance, making white men wealthy. The irrigation systems have long since disappeared; fertilizer is far too costly for use; trees have been cut down to make room for hundreds of tiny farms to support the increasing population.

133 Not even all the plains are naturally productive. Many of them, on  
134 the contrary, are arid, sterile, and forbidding, covered with cacti and other spiny plants. Indeed, the most arid areas of Haiti, including its salt marshes, are lowlands.

• 13 Although the country is wholly in the tropics, the usual preconceived notion of the tropics does not apply. There are no impenetrable rain forests or jungles, no wild beasts, and very few snakes.  
132 Because of the mountains, there are wide differences in rainfall, soil, and vegetation, within a short distance. Occasional hurricanes do great damage to shipping and the water fronts. Infrequent droughts sometimes last for two or three months. Hailstorms that damage growing crops are fairly common. Taken as a whole, the country has an ample but not heavy rainfall; coming generally from the east and northeast, the trade winds strike the high ridges in the north and there deposit the greater part of their moisture in the Plaine du Nord. By the time they have passed down the western slope and across the Central Plain they are dried and rarefied, so that this region becomes

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## OUTER ASPECTS OF HAITI

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[538] **H**AITIAN poets rarely sing the beauty of their native land, nor do the travelers who roam the earth dwell long upon this particular pearl of the Antilles. Mountains slope down into the sea, sunlight sparkles upon the foaming waves as they roll in, peninsulas and bays lend variety to the coastline: yet the majestic display does not make the visitor cherish Haiti in his mind and heart alongside Sicily or Scotland or Maine or Japan. Columbus in 1492 thought the island "enchanting," saying that "it is a wonder. Its mountains and plains, and meadows and fields are so beautiful and rich for planting and sowing, and rearing cattle of all kinds, and for building towns and villages" that it "surpasses anything that would be believed by one who had not seen it."<sup>1</sup> The Spanish admiral viewed his discoveries with the eye of faith, seeing the glories which might come to be; his enthusiasm was matched by other early Spaniards. The French in the eighteenth century likewise thought the land beautiful, and with skillful management made their human habitations an ornament to generous nature.

• 13  
105 If one could view Haiti only from the sea or from the air, he would probably, like the Spaniards and Frenchmen, speak in rhapsodies, for the land still stands up out of the sea—"the highest peak of that submerged mountain range whose summit appear as the islands of the Greater Antilles."<sup>2</sup> Visitors disembark from their ships or planes, however, see the poverty, the backwardness, the pathetic smallness of human effort which matches so ill with what nature originally provided, and come away with a feeling of disappointment. Not even the little things of Haiti are immediately attractive: the peasants are not "quaint," their costumes are not "picturesque," their towns are not "colorful"; even the souvenirs to take back to the tourist ship have likely as not been made in New York and imported by the local shops. Outsiders, distracted by the human element, hardly glance at the scenery; and since as condensed tourists they are not likely to penetrate far beyond the steamer, or stay long enough

1. Christopher Columbus, *Saint Leger*, R. H. Major, ed. London, 1870, p. 2.2. *White Moun, Black Haiti*, p. 6.

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105 to regard the people as neighbors, their first impression is generally  
 13 their abiding one.

13 And yet the land has its memorable beauties. To lie at anchor in the harbor at Port-au-Prince early in the morning and watch the long arm of the southern peninsula turn gradually from purple vagueness to brilliant green as the sun rises back of the capital; to see a tiny ship with its patched and colored sail glide quietly by on its way out to the island of La Gonâve, lying twenty miles to the west, like a morsel about to be swallowed by the open jaws of the "mainland"; to hear the morning noises drifting across the water, with a snatch of song or laughter in the air; to watch Port-au-Prince come to life, white and sparkling as the sun strikes it—this is the proper introduction to Haiti. Beyond the capital are the hills and mountains; if one will take the time, he may look back as he climbs and see not only the whiteness of the city, but the gracious sweep of the harbor, and the peninsula losing itself in the western distance. He will think without apology of a lesser Naples, and will not miss Vesuvius. Within the country is every variety of scenery: high mountains whose peaks are frequently shrouded in misty clouds; ranges of lower mountains ("morne" is the eloquent Haitian name for them) which can be melancholy, kindly, or forbidding, as the spirit of the traveler will; dull waters of salt marshes; and deserts where cactus grows, spiked and hairy, to enormous heights; canyons, waterfalls, dried-up streams; moors, little jungles, farms; rich plantations of sugar cane, dusty stretches of sheer barrenness—everything, in fact, from majesty to complete insipidity. Rarely can one find such utter diversity in a small space as in Haiti. One might fancy himself successively on Egdon Heath, in an Arizona desert, among the Dakota Bad Lands, in old Saint-Domingue, in tropical Africa, in the Pyrenees.

361 The sad truth remains: nothing that man has done in Haiti for a  
 [342] century and a quarter has been worthy of the landscape. A few government buildings in Port-au-Prince are passable, and the city as a whole is not a blemish; yet not to have seen it is to have missed no great aesthetic experience. Elsewhere the towns and villages run the gamut from monotonous small-scale structures to mere collections of shanties. Great gashes have been cut in the forests by generations of earth-hungry peasants who needed farms. Much of the land looks poor; indeed, thousands of once fertile acres are now beyond any use at all, grown up in cactus, because of overuse and misuse for-